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Kathi Weeks

***The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, £16.99 pbk, (ISBN:9780822351122), 304pp.**

**Reviewed by FREDERICK H. PITTS, UNIVERSITY OF BATH**

Rather than just one problem, as suggested by its title, the introduction to Weeks's *The Problem With Work* (2011) actually suggests *two* problems: work's *quantity* and its *quality*. Yet the single 'problem' implied by the title intimates more generally a provocation over the nature of what a problem *is* and the process by which something is rendered problematic. Problems are neither given nor objective, but subject to struggle over their exposure and definition. In *The Problem With Work*, Weeks engages initially with the *unproblematic* status afforded work in capitalist society. Its *problematic* status, Weeks wagers, is obscured by its depoliticisation.

In the introduction, Weeks identifies two aspects of this depoliticisation. The first is the way in which work is privatised. Employment is seen not as a social relationship but as a private, individual one. Hence, work is seen as outside the sphere of the political. The second is the lack of political organisation or activism around issues of work. Weeks suggests that by talking about work and making it public rather than private, one denaturalises it, repoliticising and problematising it. The apparatus through which Weeks attempts to do this is comprised of two concepts: the work society and the work ethic.

As noted, Weeks's 'problem with work' is twofold, consisting respectively of quality and quantity. What interests me specifically about the book is the way in which the dialectical movement between these two terms, quality and quantity, is understood through Weeks's dual conceptual apparatus of the work society and the work ethic. By means of these two concepts, Weeks articulates the social abstraction by which the qualitative is rendered quantitative and the heterogeneous made commensurable.

Chapter 1 traces the development of the concept of the work ethic. Chapter 2 subjects existing critiques of capitalist work to scrutiny, socialist celebrations of labour. Chapter 3 surpasses the anti-work critique of the first two chapters to the projection of a post-work alternative. The first demand assessed is that for a guaranteed basic income. In Chapter 4, the demand for a thirty-hour week is considered. By way of conclusion, Chapter 5 rephrases these recommendations in terms of their status as 'utopian demands', suggesting the potential utility of utopianism as a critical and radical stance in the struggle against work.

A highpoint of the analysis can be found in the first half, in Weeks's reconciliation of Marx and Weber on the work ethic and abstract labour. For Weeks, abstract labour is 'both a conceptual abstraction that reduces different kinds of concrete labor to labor in general and a practical process that transforms the concrete laboring activities of individuals according to the exigencies of large-scale social production' (2011, pp. 87-88). Most interesting here is the discussion is the novel way in which Weeks reconciles Weber's theorisation of the origins of capitalism with Marx's understanding of the abstraction of labour in the process of capitalist exchange.

In this brilliant and original reading, Weeks draws upon Weber's conceptualisation of the role played by 'the calling' in the Protestant foundations of capitalism, suggesting that any notion of work where 'callings' are of equal worth before God fits remarkably well with 'an economic system predicated on labor abstracted from the specificity of the working person and the particular task'. The evaluation of one's labours by means of an assessment of quantity rather than quality mirrors the evaluation made in the process of exchange. As Weeks suggests in her treatment of the 'calling', the equalisation of different kinds of work is nothing less than abstract labour in action (2011, pp. 44-45).

There is some debate in the Marxist tradition as to what abstract labour is and where it comes from, orienting itself around the proximity of differing explanations to the realm of either production or circulation (see Saad-Filho 1997 for an good initial summary). It would have been interesting to have seen Weeks situate her discussion of abstract labour more squarely in the context of

contemporary contention, in which controversy is easily stoked. More may have been done to express in stronger terms the implied support offered towards some of the more convincing accounts in the literature on abstract labour.

For instance, Weeks's account is both compatible with, and nourishing of, other approaches which see abstract labour as having a conceptual as well as practical existence. One such approach is that which posits abstract labour as subject to an unfolding process of abstraction that *culminates* in exchange and in the realm of circulation, but takes a *tentative* and *ideal* practical existence in the sphere of production by means of various techniques of counting, comparing and commensurating works of different kinds, bringing them into a temporary social relation with one another before they attain full sociality in the marketplace of commodities (see Bellofiore 2009 for such an account). How might Weeks situate her account of abstract labour within this wider context of the circuit of capital, in the frame of reference provided by exchange, commodities, consumption and circulation?

What Weeks affords us in her analysis are invaluable theoretical tools for exploring how the abstraction of labour proceeds in not only the practical existence of work, but its *political* existence, rendering labours equivalent by means of ideological constructions such as the work ethic and its attendant category of the 'calling'. It is the equivalence drawn between diverse labours and the resultant comparability of their products that is the foundation upon which a system of exchange such as that of capitalism persists.

As suggested earlier in this review, Weeks's project is ultimately one of *denaturalising* work, by presenting it in the exact complexion in which we find it in capitalist society. In making work 'public,' by naming it, one simultaneously renders it 'political' and opens it up for contestation (2011, p. 7). The virtue of Weeks's treatment is the way in which she situates abstract labour in a radically repoliticised context open to contestation and struggle, in constant motion and becoming in society rather than ossified as the cold, hard economic residue of production.

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